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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH FORMER PRESIDENT
BABANGIDA, DISCUSSES 2011 ELECTIONS, RELIGIOUS ISSUES, AND
PDP POLITICS

REF: A. LAGOS 0213 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. ABUJA 0745

[1](#)C. ABUJA 0628

[1](#)D. ABUJA 0517

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On May 4, Ambassador (accompanied by Poloff notetaker) met with former Nigerian President General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, commonly referred to as IBB. IBB spoke frankly about his disappointment with the electoral reform process, the unlikely possibility of a military coup, the internal politics of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and the problems with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). He maintained that the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) Report should have been "immediately" released to the public and submitted to the National Assembly for consideration. He alleged the subsequent reviews and white papers on the ERC Report were just attempts to "railroad" the process (ref D). IBB acknowledged that INEC lacked transparency and credible staff, which allowed for the "prearranged results" of elections. He also shared his concern that if the necessary electoral reforms did not take place this year, there would be "a lot of problems" as he thought the populace would not tolerate this. When asked about the possibility of a military coup, Babangida said he was "definitely sure" there would not/not be a coup as they are no longer "fashionable." A founding member of the PDP, Babangida expressed his dissatisfaction with the current state of his party, claiming its leaders interfere too much with the polls and day to day issues, particularly at the state level. Ambassador also inquired about IBB's thoughts on religious tension in Nigeria, which he credited to "politics" and individuals who use religion as a platform to advance their political agenda. He noted a lingering intra-religious tension between Muslim sects in Kano over the 2007 murder of a cleric, and allegations that Kano Governor Ibrahim Shekarau was involved. On the topic of anti-corruption, IBB said that there was still a perception that the U.S. disengaged from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) solely based on the dismissal of former Chairman Nuhu Ribadu. Ambassador stressed that was not the case and that the U.S. had taken a step back to allow the EFCC time to prove itself as an

institution. IBB agreed it was fair to give the institution time, but urged the U.S. to reestablish training of the younger, rank and file officers in order to change the mentality within the agency. In response to IBB's inquiry about what the U.S. was doing in the Niger Delta, the Ambassador highlighted the training and equipment we have provided, but stressed that there were many other offers made that we have not yet received a response to. IBB claimed he would speak to President Yar'Adua about the offers as the technical assistance would be good for the country. Overall, IBB was frank and forthcoming about his views of the current administration, but also not losing an opportunity to castigate his main PDP rival, former President Obasanjo. End Summary.

ELECTORAL REFORM

12. (C) On May 4, Ambassador (and Poloff notetaker) traveled to Minna, capital of Niger State, to meet with former Nigerian President General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, often referred to as IBB. Ambassador thanked Babangida for agreeing to meet and explained that she was only paying a courtesy call now given that she had been waiting for the Supreme Court ruling on President Yar'Adua's election to be over before reaching out to former heads of state in order to avoid creating the wrong impression of possible ulterior motives. Unfortunately, it took almost two years for the decision to be final. Ambassador asked IBB his thoughts on where Nigeria was headed in the short and medium term, especially with regard to the 2011 elections. IBB replied that the GON seemed "not to learn very quickly." He noted

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that both international and domestic observers judged the 2007 elections as poor and that he had hoped the establishment of the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) would have addressed the problems. However, the handling of the ERC report had only created more trouble. IBB maintained that the ERC Report should have been made public "immediately" after it was submitted to President Yar'Adua and then sent directly to the National Assembly since constitutional amendments were necessary for the implementation of a number of the recommendations. He added that the report should not have been sent to the Federal Executive Council (FEC -- essentially the Cabinet) and subsequently to the Council of State (COS -- a constitutionally established consultative body with over 50 members, including all 36 serving governors and all former Heads of States amongst others) because nothing "concrete" comes from those meetings (ref D). As a member of the Council of State, IBB said he hardly attends the meetings any more as it has become a routine exercise where the governors make decisions about issues before the session and then inform the President after the fact. Noting that the ERC was comprised of "well respected civil servants" with a great deal of integrity, IBB maintained that the report they issued should have been accepted as credible and not subjected to ministerial approval.

13. (C) Although IBB claimed he was not at the Council of State (COS) meeting when the White Paper was discussed, he said he had been following the issue closely. Ambassador expressed her hope that the ERC Report would be submitted to the National Assembly and not just the COS views on the White Paper. IBB added that he hopes the National Assembly will "rise to the challenge" of making the necessary constitutional amendments to implement meaningful reform. He admitted, however, to having some misgivings about the contents of the ERC Report -- only liking "85 percent" of it -- but added that the executive White Paper was merely an attempt at "railroading" the process. When Ambassador asked which specific points IBB found objectionable, he said that, while he was okay with the idea of allowing independent parties to run, he felt too many political parties "retard" democratization, adding that having just two choices still provided a choice. IBB also maintained that parties and

candidates should be required to meet certain criteria for eligibility, otherwise the system would be overrun by groups with no conviction.

14. (C) Noting that the issue of who held the authority to appoint the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairman was one of the more contentious points in the ERC Report, Ambassador asked for IBB's opinion on the subject. IBB replied that it did not matter how the chairman was appointed so long as he was of strong character who could stand up to the President. He did admit that the current INEC lacked "transparency" and did not have "credible people" on its staff, highlighting the fact that "prearranged results" from elections could only occur with INEC's complicity. IBB suggested that the U.S. could help in this aspect with programs informing citizens of their rights and civic duty. Ambassador noted that the U.S. provided a great deal of assistance leading up to the 2007 elections, such as funding civil society organizations (CSOs) to develop voter awareness, and training observers to act as election monitors throughout the country. Ambassador added that the U.S. is already working with CSOs on these same capacity building areas for 2011.

15. (C) The Ambassador asked if IBB was optimistic that electoral reform would take place in the coming months, and if not, what he predicted for the lead up to the 2011 elections. Noting the number of legal points to be addressed, as well as the need to inform the public about any changes, IBB responded that ideally the reforms should be done this year to allow for enough time to prepare for 2011. He suggested that if reforms were not completed by the end of this year, there would be "a lot of problems, like in Ekiti"

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(ref A). IBB lamented the fact that the situation in Ekiti created the perception of the nation "going to war" when in fact it was a common occurrence in Nigeria due to INEC's lack of credibility. He added that in addition to reforms, the public needed to be better educated about their civic responsibility.

MILITARY COUP

16. (C) In light of IBB's remark about "problems" leading up to 2011, Ambassador asked whether IBB believed there was still a potential for a military coup to take place in Nigeria. IBB replied that he was "definitely sure" there would not/not be a coup "as we know it." He said that the world had changed and coup d'etats were "no longer fashionable in the third world." He added his belief that the current military was more "western educated and enlightened" to the consequences of such an act. The military is now made up of educated officers who are "smart enough" to not get involved, but rather stand aside and watch the civilians without interference, according to Babangida. IBB agreed with the Ambassador that the military would, however, take action in cases of the need to restore civil order, similar to what happened in Jos.

RELIGIOUS TENSION

17. (C) Noting increased sectarian violence, including a recent incident in Minna (ref C), and highlighting the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom's April visit to Nigeria (ref B), Ambassador asked for IBB's comments on religious and communal tensions. IBB said that "individuals" make all the difference and that lack of strong state-level leadership contributed to such tensions. Citing Jos as an example, IBB said that the people of Plateau State had lived in harmony for many years until "politics" came into play. IBB said that out of 24 Permanent Secretaries in Plateau State, 15 belonged to the same tribe as the governor. Incidents like that lead Christians to believe that only a Christian could serve their interests and Muslims to believe only a Muslim could serve theirs, according to IBB. A good leader, on the

other hand, creates an environment where people of different faiths and ethnicities intermarry and live together peacefully, said IBB. Unfortunately, he added, many individuals use the platform of religion to advance their political goals.

18. (C) Moving away from the Jos scenario, the Ambassador asked if IBB had any thoughts on the situation in Kano given some of the same inter-religious issues and tensions. According to IBB, intra-religious tension between Muslims of different sects was more a problem than inter-religious tension between Christians in Muslims in Kano. IBB cited the Izala, Tijaniyyah, and Qadiriyyah sects in Kano as an example, claiming that they did not like one another. The former head of state provided an example of where Izala followers supported Christian candidates in Local Government Area elections over candidates of other Muslim sects. He added that the "most troubling" issue and the one to watch was the intra-Muslim animosity. It is still exacerbated in Kano by the lingering tension between Muslim sects over the murder of a cleric and continuing reports that the governor was involved. (Note: In April 2007, Sheikh Ja'afar Adam was gunned down in a Kano mosque. To date, no suspects have been arrested, but there is continued speculation that Kano State Governor Ibrahim Shekarau hired gunmen to murder the Skeikh. According to press reports as recent as April 13, 2009, Ja'afar had accused Governor Shekarau of not being serious about Shari'a implementation in Kano and using the state Hisbah to embezzle money. Shekarau allegedly felt that Ja'afar's accusations could hurt his campaign for re-election as governor in 2007 and thus sponsored his assassination. End Note.) IBB did say that although the atmosphere was tense, things were "containable" and could be improved with programs to educate people and change attitudes.

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PEOPLES DEMOCRATIC PARTY (PDP)

19. (C) Highlighting the fact that IBB was a founding member of the PDP, Ambassador inquired about his thoughts on the party's current status. IBB said that he "would be lying" if he said he was happy with the PDP. He added that "65-70 percent of the problem with the PDP was at the polls," lamenting that they insist on changing election results in their favor. According to IBB, the national PDP tends to interfere too much with the day to day issues on the state level, and the national leadership does not realize that once their candidate is elected, he is no longer just a representative of the party, but of the people in his electorate. IBB said that he supports the G-21 (a group within the PDP, led by former Senate President Ken Nnamani, who pushed for reform to the party constitution) because he knows they are trying to do the right thing. Many of the other leaders, according to IBB, were still "nostalgic" for the way things were under "crazy" former President Obasanjo and "brut" PDP Chairman Aliyu who pushed people to do whatever they wanted. IBB stressed the need for reforms within the PDP, and Ambassador asked if he thought the recent change to the PDP constitution limiting the term of the Board of Trustees (BOT) Chairman was a good start. He replied that as long as Obasanjo remained Chairman until 2011, there would be no real changes. According to IBB, if there were true reforms taking place, Obasanjo would have been ousted already.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRIMES COMMISSION (EFCC)

10. (C) Turning the conversation to anti-corruption issues, Ambassador noted that the U.S. has stepped back from working with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), stressing that this decision was not related to either the old or new chairman. Rather, she explained, the U.S. was allowing the EFCC, under its new Chairman, time to prove itself as an institution. IBB said that while it was fair for the U.S. to give the EFCC time to prove itself, the

perception was indeed that the U.S. disengaged solely due to an allegiance to former Chairman Nuhu Ribadu. He maintained that the aim of the agency was good, but that former President Obasanjo used it as his own personal weapon to conduct a "witch hunt" against his opponents and to protect his associates. IBB claimed Obasanjo put a young, inexperienced man in charge (Ribadu) who would do his bidding, and the agency "went wild" arresting and convicting people without question or evidence. IBB suggested that the only way to change the mentality of the agency was to continue to train the young officers and that if nothing else, he urged the U.S. to re-establish its technical assistance to the rank and file. Ambassador acknowledged the perception of the U.S. stance, but stressed that it had nothing to do with either the former or present chairmen, but rather the institution's performance. Later, when IBB inquired about our efforts to prevent drug-trafficking, Ambassador highlighted U.S. anti-corruption efforts with the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and the National Drug and Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and suggested that the focus should not be solely on the EFCC.

IBB QUESTIONS FOR AMB

11. (C) Ambassador thanked IBB for his frank comments and asked if he had any questions for her. His first inquiry was about the U.S. economy and whether capitalism was on its way out. Ambassador replied that no new phrases or labels have been developed for the new era, but noted that President Obama and the U.S. were re-examining "markers in history" as we navigate our way through a new environment. Ambassador highlighted the U.S. focus on values, taking care of people, and carrying out dialogue with both friends and enemies. IBB said that the U.S. was "doing well" and that talking to friends and enemies was a "smart move." IBB then inquired about U.S. efforts in the Niger Delta. Ambassador said that while we have provided some training and equipment, we had

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made quite a few offers to which we had received no response from the GON, despite repeated reminders. IBB claimed he would speak to President Yar'Adua about the lack of response because such programs would be of benefit to the country.

COMMENT

12. (C) IBB appeared to speak openly and frankly, especially sharing his disappointment with the electoral reform process and the inner workings of the PDP. Although he contends a military coup is unlikely, his prediction of "problems" leading up to 2011 is worrisome, especially considering the slow progress on much needed electoral reform. However, at present we see those problems being clashes of violence like in Ekiti or civil disobedience -- also like in Ekiti -- with the parade of disrobed women protesting. Indeed, it will be an interesting measure of his current pull to see if he does indeed speak to Yar'Adua about our repeated offers of assistance in the Niger Delta and if it leads to any substantive response. Although there have been reports alleging he is ill, IBB appeared vibrant, healthy, and energetic throughout the hour plus meeting and encouraged continued dialogue with the Ambassador. End Comment.

13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS